

Gunning on Tangier Island

Story and Photos
by
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Tangier is known for the variety of waterfowl that visit every year. A good mixture of goose and duck decoys is sure to draw some attention in the shallow flats around the island.

The duck season had not gone well the first month. We had a good hunt for wood ducks on the opener, but since then it had been slow, a duck here and there. As we moved into December, I became more and more excited about my upcoming waterfowling trip to the legendary Tangier Island 20 miles out in Chesapeake Bay. For four years I had been listening to a fellow teacher talk about the duck hunting on Tangier, about a sky full of birds and shooting until his arm hurt.

Finally we got a group of seven together and booked a trip for the winter school break.

There are certain people who look forward to school vacations and snow days more than the kids. They are the teachers. So on Dec. 18, when the last bell of the day rang signaling winter break, we cut off the lights, locked the doors, and headed to our vehicles in a hurry. The building was empty within minutes.

It was hard waiting around for two

days before actually leaving for Tangier. One danger of planning a trip like this is building unreasonable expectations. I'd been hunting and fishing in enough places to know better but couldn't help myself when it came to Tangier. I created a blind in my mind, set imaginary decoys, and watched bird after bird come gliding into the spread and fall to my shot. By the time it was time to go, I had killed my limit twice over. Finally, after a long 48 hours, we loaded the cars and headed to Reedville on



One doesn't have to go far to get to good hunting around Tangier, but the boat ride can be a little chilly at 5 a.m.

Cole Clarkson finds a seat next to a nice pile of ducks and brant.



the Bay to catch an hour-long ride in a deadrise skiff to Tangier.

Jeff Crockett, one of the remaining true Chesapeake Bay watermen and as droll and nice a guy as there is, was waiting for

us when we arrived at the Cockrell Deli mid-morning on Dec. 21. An hour later, we had unpacked our gear and in another hour, we were in the blinds with decoys set.

I spent the first afternoon with my

brother and Bobby King of Jeff Crockett's guide service. We hunted in an open-water blind on a giant flat with a water depth of two to three feet for as far as one could see. The weather was fairly ducky, mid-40s and overcast with a wind out of the northeast at roughly 12 miles an hour.

If anything will teach you that it is more about "gettin' out there" than the number of birds you take home, it is duck hunting in Virginia. The experience of the hunt is more often born of company and conversation than toting home a heavy bag. Having the opportunity to hunt with Bobby King on Tangier Island was an experience all to itself. Never have I enjoyed the hours in a blind with someone as much as I have with Bobby. From his stories of dredging crabs in the oppressive summer heat to the history of the island, we gathered a real sense of the people and the place.

"I truly love this, boys, I dooooo," Bobby said. "I just love being out here. We get some wiiiiind, we might keel some biiiirds in here this afternoooooon," Bobby's distinct Tangier dialect sounded something like a proper English accent with a hint of Southern twang. We had not been in the blind 15 minutes when he ducked his head behind the cedar trees and turned quickly toward us.

"Brant. Get chooore heads doooooown boys! You never know. This bunch might doooo't." I had never seen a brant, let alone heard one, so I didn't know what to expect. I couldn't help but poke my head above the cover of the blind to sneak a peek. I saw three large dark birds, bigger than ducks and smaller than geese, flying low, just two or three feet off the water and heading on a path that would take them about 100 yards across the flat below us. Suddenly and without warning, Bobby let out a call. "B-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-UP! B-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-l-UP!" I had never heard anyone call ducks or geese with his mouth before. To the brant, Bobby must have sounded awfully friendly. They immediately banked into the



Tangier's isolation has preserved a dialect and culture over time. With growing technology and the increasing difficulty of making a living on the water, some of the old-timers worry that too many of the younger generation are leaving, and that in time there won't be enough people left to carry on the traditions.

wind and headed straight for us. "Get ready, boys," Bobby whispered excitedly. The birds kept coming.

The brant turned wide and just when it looked like they might go on by, Bobby let out another call, "B-L-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-U-P," and the birds swung hard and headed right for us, setting their wings and gliding into the decoys at some 30 yards out. Just as their feet were about to hit the water, we stood and shot, knocking down two of the three.

The scenario repeated itself several times over the next few hours, and soon we had our six-bird limit of brant. By 3 p.m. we were letting groups of five and six light in the decoys for several minutes before they realized something was up and flew off to find friendlier companions.

We saw huge flights of widgeon rafting on a sand bar a quarter-mile off as the tide dropped, but none came close enough for a shot. One flight of redheads did make the mistake of swinging near my end of the blind, and I stood and folded two.

So the first afternoon was a great success: six brant, two redheads. The birds of my imaginary hunt had become a reality.

The next morning we were out of bed at 5:30 and back in the boats in 30 minutes. I hunted again with Bobby in the same blind, but this time with a friend from work, Stu Brown. With dawn rapidly approaching, flights of ducks appeared in the red sky over the Bay. Again there were giant rafts of widgeon and redheads, as well as black ducks and pintails. The brant were still around as well and presented us with our first opportunity of the morning. A group of six buzzed over our heads, riding the wind. We shot two. Another group followed shortly in similar fashion, and we dumped four. We were done with our limits of brant an hour after we began. As we picked up the last of the birds, we decided to change the spread a little in hopes of drawing in a few more ducks. Tossing a dozen or so redhead decoys off to the north side of the blind proved to make all the difference.

Several minutes later, two widgeon dropped from the sky and circled twice, finally succumbing to Bobby's coaxing whistle to land in the redhead decoys. They banked with the sun at our backs, lighting the drake's white and green head as the pair cupped their wings and dropped within range. Stu and I rose and shot both. We left the blind around 11 a.m. to make the trip back across the Bay to the mainland, toting six brant, two widgeon, and two redheads. A fine morning of "gunning" as they call it on Tangier. A fine trip altogether.

Jeff Crockett and his guides run a top-notch guide service. For more information on hunting or "gunning" on Tangier Island, contact Jeff Crockett: 757-694-1055.

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